

to promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which
where in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church;
to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y.

163

May, 1951

Worship Methods in the Rural Church

By Edward Krusen Ziegler*



On a summer Sunday morning recently I worshipped with the congregation of the Valhermosa Springs Christian Community Church in one of the loveliest sections of the Tennessee Valley in Alabama. The service was led by Bob Glenn, "1950 Rural Minister of the Year for Alabama." The church, dedicated only last May, is a monument to the consecration of a great minister and a loyal people. It is built of native sandstone, and the sanctuary walls and ceiling are of red cedar. There was prayer by a farmer elder, without a coat or tie. The minister said to his people, as he invited them to the Lord's table, "Come, my beloved!" There I witnessed worship at its best. The whole setting — the rich, almost tangible fellowship, the simple beauty, the leadership of a man with God in his heart, God's radiance on his face — made the moment one of unforgettable dignity. The presence of God was unmistakably real.

Another example: A group of thoughtful people, mostly professional people from Chicago, bought a farm near a new little community church. They established a cooperative to manage the affairs of the new community, sold the land in family-size plots, and began to build their homes. When they laid out and graded their roads, they held a service dedicating these roads to the outgoing processes of sharing and breadwinning and the incoming of friends, doctors, ministers, teachers — asking the blessing of God on the community's roads.

I. THE PRIMACY OF WORSHIP

These and other vital experiences of worship are a part of a significant movement in the rural churches of the world toward satisfying worship experiences as a major means of combatting secularism and of giving new life to the church. As rural sociologists and others interested in the building of a stable rural civilization are coming more and more to recognize the centrality of the church, so we who give thought and loving concern to the rural church are coming to see the centrality of vital worship in its program.

Several years ago Bishop J. Waskom Pickett, of the Methodist Church in India, brought together data from a wide study of the growth of the mass movement

*Dr. Ziegler is known to many readers of The Christian Rural Fellowship through his recent bulletins and as Consultant on Rural Worship to Agricultural Missions, Inc. We are grateful to him for this summary of his study and experience in a most important field. — I. W. Moomaw

churches which proved that the greatest factor in wholesome growth of the people was vital worship. Where it was central and well planned, there was character, personality growth, and community respect. Where worship was neglected or slovenly, social and spiritual growth lagged. It is thus in America. Only the churches in which worship is central and real show evidence of spiritual vigor and social effectiveness.

It is easy to allow peripheral activities of the church to usurp the central place which worship should have. The minister may become so absorbed in organizational and promotional pink tape, in his garden, in planning wholesome recreation, even in preaching and teaching, that he fails in the provision of rich and helpful opportunities for creative worship for himself and for his people.

Nothing else in all the world is so important. In worship the minister and his people will find vision. They will find serenity — the grace to be still and to stand unmoved through the crash of falling worlds about their ears. They will find guidance — a clear and unmistakable "thus saith the Lord" for everyday living and for solving the great problems confronting us all. They will find power — to live triumphantly in a defeated age, nobly when they are surrounded by meanness, creatively when others meet frustration and futility, lovingly when other men act from motives of selfishness and fear. Above all, they will find God.

Dean Sperry, in that most thoughtful of American books, Reality in Worship says: "There remains to the church, then, the conduct of public worship as an office which no other institution has claimed as its prerogative and peculiar mission. . . . So long as the church bids men to the worship of God and provides a simple and credible vehicle for worship, it need not question its place, mission, and influence in the world. If it loses faith in the act of worship, is thoughtless in the ordering of worship, and careless in the conduct of worship, it need not look to its avocations to save it. It is dead at its heart, and no chafing of the extremities, producing what Carlyle called 'quaint galvanic sprawlings,' will bring back the life that has left it. . . ."

It is clear, therefore, that the chief task of the church is to bring men and women and children into that direct, life-changing communion with God which is at the heart of religion. Thus God gets what he desires: children in loving and growing fellowship with him; and man finds his deepest hunger satisfied: contact, lasting and ever new, with his Father.

The worshipper receives strength from the worshipping group. To have been one of a group, large or small, united for a brief time in experiencing communion with God, praying for each other, and joining heart and mind praying together; to have felt the arm of God across the shoulders of the group — this is the noblest and most spiritual of all human experiences. No stronger force for welding persons into true community can ever be found than common worship which is real and sincere.

Effective worship results in powerful emotional reinforcement of ideals and attitudes. Through the experience of worship we find new power to win victory over every form of evil and sin in ourselves and in our environment. We find release from anxiety, bad habits, fear, and those attitudes and traits which make us unchristian in personal character and community and family relationships. Worship pours the whole warmth of emotional life into striving to make our ideals reality, to give substance to God's dreams and ours, to build the walls of the city of God firm and true in the life of man.

Worship makes for stability. It integrates us into true community groups.

ves us insight into eternal values, and promotes our commitment to them. Family solidarity is immeasurably deepened by the family altar. In the community where friendship is vital and in touch with daily life, there is reconciliation, forgiveness, brotherly love, sharing. Divisions are healed, strife is shamed, cooperation is altered. The stability of the church across all the artificial lines of international frontiers: lines of language, race, and color; curtains of iron, bamboo, or silk; is due in no small measure to the fact that Christians everywhere unite in praying, "Our Father," and in a common sacrament of broken bread and a cup.

II. WORSHIP CENTRAL IN THE RURAL CHURCH

The relevance of all this for the rural church is obvious. It has often been said, facetiously, that a city church is made up of a great lot of people who do not know each other and are glad they do not; while a country church is made up of a smaller number of people who do know each other and are sorry they do! Ordinarily, rural life is far from idyllic, and the sense of community is marred by hard class lines, by petty cleavages, by feuding and fighting of long standing. The strong pressures and pulls of nearby towns or cities; the insidious penetration of urban paganisms through radio, comics, and television; the moving of community centers by consolidation of schools -- all these factors have powerfully affected rural community living. The church may well be the integrating center of true community, but it will be so only on two conditions: that it be united and that it be truly the church -- understanding, appreciating, and providing for its highest mission, that of uniting people under God, in his worship, providing the true conditions for spiritual growth, leading in the service of God's people.

All over the world rural life has been rapidly and progressively secularized. Wherever the family farm has given way to mechanized commercial agriculture, wherever agriculture is no longer a way of life, where greed and exploitation have replaced a reverent appreciation and conservation of the resources of the good earth, the church is challenged. Where the worship in the rural church is vital and true and where it is intimately linked with daily life, it will have a powerful effect upon these conditions. The surest way to check the trend toward secularization of rural life, to sanctify it anew, is to celebrate in true and vital worship the values of rural life, to lift up in worship man's sacred obligation of stewardship of the good earth and its resources. The abiding sense of true community will not be restored by agonized wringing of the hands and by furious outcries against the encroachments of paganism, but by building the sense of true community through vital worship experience for all peoples.

If we would stem the tide of secularization, we who are in the rural church must find ways to put the consciousness of God into the stream of daily life and work. We must interpret the conservation of the soil and the resources of the good earth as a divine stewardship. We must develop in rural people the sure and sturdy conviction that they are God's colleagues in the creation of food and fiber for the sustenance of his family, that they too are children in that family, and therefore brothers one of another all across the earth. The acts of their daily life and work must be sanctified by prayer, their joys and successes celebrated in brotherly praise, their problems and decisions illuminated by divine guidance and in their common quest for God. Their home life must be sweetened and stabilized by rich, varied, and constant use of the family altar. Their beasts, their flocks, their fields, orchards, and gardens will be seen as the means God has placed in their hands to carry out their common task with him. Wherever worship and daily life and work are divorced one from the other, worship becomes formal, cold, and unreal, and work becomes secularized drudgery. Wherever worship is the expression of the religious consciousness in relation to work and that work is done

in the light of the worker's communion with God, prayer becomes power and work is sanctified, made glorious, and infinitely rewarding.

III. HOW THE CHURCHES ARE DOING IT

In the beginning I mentioned a few examples of ways in which country churches are developing rich and vital worship experiences for rural people that meet the needs I have here described. In my work as Consultant on Rural Worship for Agricultural Missions, Inc., I have found all over the world a keen interest in such development, a great hunger for guidance and creative planning, and also a large number of people who know the art of worship and are creating materials, leading in acts of worship that ring bells in the hearts of rural folk.

We are undertaking to share the observations, experiences, and new materials of rural worship through our quarterly bulletin, "Worship in the Rural Church." Some indication of the wide range of experience and creativity discovered may be had by looking through the thirteen bulletins issued thus far: a stimulating paper on drama in the rural church by Margaret Blair Johnstone; another by Margaret Palmer Fisk on the place of the rhythmic choir in rural churches; orders of worship for rural life festivals in India, Africa, and the United States; home dedication services; dedications for Lord's acres, wells, gardens, carloads of beans sent for relief, services of worship on threshing-floors; Plough Sunday observances; harvest Thanksgivings; family worship programs; celebrations of Christmas, Easter, and other parts of the Christian year.

There are several specific lines of worship experience being developed, namely:

1. The exaltation and celebration of rural life values. James William Sells and the Kesters have pioneered in the preparation of services of worship which celebrate and thereby strengthen the consecration of rural people to their tasks. They have made us all aware of the need for dedicating seed, soil, and sowers to the creative task of producing and sharing food. They have linked up worship with agriculture in new and exciting ways. A group of farmers who sincerely and unitedly share in such services will ever after be sure of their place in God's plan. They will walk the earth with appreciation, till it with joy, harvest its crops with reverence, and share its bounties with compassionate love.

2. Celebrating stewardship of the earth. Liberty Hyde Bailey's book, The Holy Earth, is almost a devotional classic. It has stimulated research in the Scriptures and has made us aware as never before of the religious values of conservation of our stewardship as tenants of the Almighty. All over America and abroad churches are lifting up this sense of stewardship and reinforcing it through vital worship. Through vivid and dramatic rituals, informed preaching, acts of consecration, farmers everywhere are coming to accept this stewardship as a sacred trust, committing themselves to it in religious acts.

3. The dedication of rural resources. Here there are marvellous ways in which worship can undergird our rural life and work with meaning and beauty. We have long dedicated new churches to the worship of God, the observance of the sacraments, the deepening of Christian fellowship, and the teaching of Christian life and faith. Now the time has come when we can, and in many sections do, dedicate our homes to Christian family living, our barns to the conservation of God's gifts of food to be shared, our wells to the refreshing of God's earth and his creatures, our fields and orchards to God's work of sustaining his family in abundance, our roads to the tread of his feet and ours, both bent on his errands, our cattle and

wheat and powdered milk and baby chicks to the mission of feeding his hungry little ones where there is no bread. Thus worship may lift up in dedication and thanksgiving God's choice gifts, loaned to us to use for his purposes, to make his redemptive love real to all the world.

4. The response to beauty. Surrounded everywhere by the beauty of spacious skies, of grain fields stretching away to horizons, of apple blossoms and red fruit bending down boughs, of serene fields of clover, of stately rows of corn, then the haunting and stark beauty of winter, we who live and work in the countryside ought to be the keenest of all people in our appreciation of beauty. Through the years too many of our churches have not had the beauty we should desire for them, so as we sang, "How Lovely Are Thy Dwellings," it was only with a nostalgia for Jerusalem the Golden and a haunting dream of beauty beyond our ken. Yet here and there are churches which have real beauty, satisfying our esthetic hunger and reflecting the beauty of God. Chaste New England meetinghouses with their spires pointing the centrality of God in the town; the solid stone and brick churches of the Moravians and Mennonites and Brethren in the rich lands of Pennsylvania, Virginia, Ohio, Iowa, and Kansas; the stately dignity of the great churches built by the Lutherans and Presbyterians; the English dignity of Episcopal churches -- everywhere one can find some beautiful churches.

Now we are coming to a new appreciation of the values of beauty in the house of God. Everywhere when a rural church is built someone cries out that we must build a house worthy of God. So one finds the startling and fragrant loveliness of the cedar-lined stone community church at Valhermosa Springs, Alabama; the functional beauty and dignity of Olive Chapel Baptist Church in North Carolina; the colonial white loveliness of the Lutheran Church of the Abiding Presence at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania; the sturdy, simple lines of Eugene Smathers' Presbyterian Church at Alpine, Tennessee; the unbelievable, breath-taking beauty of the great, clear window view of the Grand Tetons from the Episcopal Church in Jackson's Hole; the hundreds of other houses of God everywhere which express in honest workmanship, chaste and simple lines, native materials, and inspired design the hunger of rural folk everywhere for a church which will express and house their sense of the presence of God who is both beauty and strength.

5. Vital preaching of the Word. Rural ministers are aware as never before of the place and power of good preaching in worship. I believe that there is as good preaching in many of our rural churches today as anywhere in the world. Arthur Wentworth Hewitt asks with indignation why no country preacher has ever been asked to give the Yale lectures on preaching! Perhaps rural preachers do not have the literary polish and classical allusions in their sermons which are typical of some great preaching. But Murray Wagner's sermon, "Watchers of the Springs," and the preaching of a score of other great rural ministers is the equal of any to be found in metropolitan pulpits.

IV. A CALL TO PIONEERING

I would challenge you, my brethren in the ministry to rural people, to creative pioneering in bringing our people into the presence of the Eternal God. We need to be experts in the art of leadership in worship. This is even more important for us than to be good rural sociologists, good educators, good organizers, great scholars, great farmers. Our major task is to bring people to God; our major opportunity for doing it is in worship. It is of the utmost importance then, that we:

1. Understand and appreciate the nature of worship experience, learning

first for ourselves the high trails to the presence of God, and then how through worship to lead all our people there.

2. Seek to create the opportunities and materials by which rural folk everywhere may express their hunger for God, find his presence, celebrate the high values of their daily experiences.

3. Make worship -- its forms, its concerns, its language, its setting, its content -- relevant to the life of our rural people.

4. Bring the deep and far-reaching social implications of the Gospel into our worship, so that the Gospel may live with power in our people's minds as they go out to their homes, their community life, their farms.

I know of no higher ministry than this, no work more sublime, no task more rewarding: that I may lead rural people -- old and young, little children and their grandparents, owner and tenant -- into the green pastures and by the still waters of God's presence.

*
* * *
* * * * *
* * *
*